

Time and Routines Organization in Early Childhood Education and Care – Participation, Opportunities, and Constraints

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify those who are involved in time management in early childhood education and care contexts and to understand the intentions underlying time and routine organization. Focus groups were carried out with 20 educators from the public and private sectors. The content analysis of these interviews suggested that educators, children, and the management/coordinators of the educational centers participate differently in time organization decisions, seeking to respond to children's needs. However, these time management decisions are often carried out according to adults' agendas, with imposed schedules that create constraints in organizing routines that respond to children's interests, especially if there are no negotiations among the agents responsible for time and routine organization. The results highlight the need to introduce greater intentionality and participation during time organization decision-making in the context of early education.

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The quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) contexts is crucial to ensure children's rights and simultaneously promote experiences that are meaningful and appropriate learning opportunities, especially considering the increasing number of children attending these education centers. In Portugal, in 2020/2021, one in two children under 3 years of age was enrolled in ECEC services and there was a high percentage of children enrolled in preschool education – from 78.3% (3 years old) to 99.0% (5 years old) (European Commission, 2023).

The organization of the educational environment, namely, the indoor and outdoor space (i.e., equipment and materials), in addition to time and routines, are essential elements of the ECEC context that can promote the quality of interactions between children, their initiative, and explorations (play) (Collins et al., 2023; Lopes da Silva et al., 2016; Nigito, 2011). In Portugal, the organization of the educational environment is highlighted in the Curriculum Guidelines for Preschool Education (*Orientações Curriculares para a Educação Pré-Escolar – OCEPE*) along with the educational intentionality and principles of pedagogy for childhood, considered one of the topics that frame all of the educator's pedagogical work (Lopes da Silva et al., 2016). The importance of the educational environment, sustained by Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory of Development (2011/2011), assumes that children's development is built within a dynamic relationship process involving environment and time. The educational process takes place in a specific time and space and includes other children and adults with whom the child interacts. Thus, the organization of the group, space, and time constitute the interconnected dimensions of the educational environment that must be planned, organized,

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evaluated, and adjusted intentionally to contribute to children's well-being, development, and learning (Lopes da Silva et al., 2016).

Time, according to Bronfenbrenner (2011), moderates changes throughout the life cycle, specifically in the proximal processes occurring at three successive levels: microtime (continuity versus discontinuity, within continuous episodes of the proximal process), mesotime (periodicity of these episodes over wide intervals, days, and weeks), and macrotime (changing expectations and events influenced by processes and outcomes throughout the life cycle) (Bronfenbrenner, 2011). Thus, it is known that the triggering of events or life experiences creates changes in the child's development and that, in this sense, it will be necessary to identify the impact of previous events and experiences, isolated or sequentially, on subsequent development (Bronfenbrenner, 2011). Likewise, Bondioli (2004a) indicates that studying the organization of time implies an understanding of context as a process in which duration, the sequence of situations, their rhythmic repetition, and distribution influence individual development.

However, although there are several studies on the quality and organization of classroom spaces and their relationship with children's development (Acer et al., 2016; Berti et al., 2019), the aspects related to the organization of routines and time management have been little explored, especially concerning professionals' conceptions and how this structuring of time is carried out (Collins et al., 2023; Costa et al., 2022). Educators bear the responsibility of creating and fostering an optimal educational environment for children's learning and engagement. Understanding their methods of time management, the individuals they engage in the process, and their perspectives and challenges in managing these aspects can bring beneficial changes in the early childhood education and care context, benefiting the educators, the children, and the family. For this reason, the present study aims to explore the process of organizing time and routines in ECEC contexts and understand the reasons underlying this organization.

Organization and management of time

Bondioli (2004b) points to the need to think about and project time as a potential instrument for educational management and as an aspect of the complex ecology of the ECEC contexts. Nevertheless, Bondioli (2004b) asserts that time does not appear to be the subject of special attention either within the scope of research or in teachers' reflections on practice. It is frequently perceived as a mere recipient of episodes with educational significance, as a pedagogically irrelevant "accessory," or as a mere organizing link. It is neither thought of nor designed as a potential instrument of educational management (Bondioli, 2011a). Still, as Bondioli sustains, the pedagogical organization of time can promote well-being and the possibility of experiencing and understanding a sense of time connected to the smooth execution of various activities. Managing daily time in an educational center, with its rhythms, cadences, and alternations, is an aspect of the pedagogical environment that influences learning and development (Bondioli, 2011b).

Neves et al. (2017) indicate that the temporal organization of contexts depends on the appropriation that adults and children make of the times and rhythms of everyday life within daycare centers and kindergartens. Therefore, developing a sense of time constitutes a fundamental learning experience for children. This process can work more efficiently if children can access an orderly, predictable, and familiar temporal articulation daily but, at the same time, not so uniform, fragmented, hurried, or rigid that it would be indifferent to the unpredictability of individual rhythms (Nigito, 2011). Consequently, time organization is problematized by answering the questions: How can we face the sequence of time and its educational influences when multiple individual times are involved? How do we organize routines if time is a system of coordinates that support the sense of individual action, the reciprocal understanding, and the architecture of identity?

Effectively, in their study, Neves et al. (2017) observed that the organization of different temporalities in the educational context brings tensions between the organization of the sequence of events in everyday life – such as sleeping, snacking, or movements to further spaces – and the educational

center's need for all children to do everything together, at the same time, and in the same way, regardless of children's temporalities. Studies focusing on sleep time confirm that there is a disjuncture between children's sleep needs, parent preferences, and center practices that increase stress and generate a negative climate in the room (Gehret et al., 2021; Pattinson et al., 2014; Staton et al., 2015). Similar results were observed regarding children's mealtime (Johansson & Berthelsen, 2014; Zorec & Vrankar, 2016). As Neves et al. (2017) underline, organizing the different temporalities in educational contexts generates tension in several ECEC contexts.

Consequently, Nigito (2004) suggests that, in ECEC contexts, there is a double articulation of time: (1) an institutional time related to the organization of day-to-day life, its rhythm, the distribution of episodes, and its flow from one episode to another; and (2) a subjective time, related to the temporal experience of young children in a broad and complex social context outside the family, constituted and elaborated through their experience – a specific sense of time, which is socialized and shared progressively. In this sense, time involves a bipolar configuration: individual subjectivity and the set of cultural and social meanings. Nigito (2004) draws attention to the lack of communication between the normative temporal order of institutions and the symbolic order of individual subjectivities. They are non-communicating systems that broadly interfere with children's learning and development process. In this way, time management strongly influences the possibility of children conceptualizing time and learning the meaning of shared time. Nevertheless, as M. N. Prieto et al. (2018) observed in their study, during the organization and management of time at schools, there is often a serious concern for the distribution and division of schedules for each action, but forgetting to reflect on how institutional time can respect children's unique and individual time. We need to consider the purposes of time organization when defining the routine, such as why the morning begins with a specific type of activity and ends with another (Barbosa, 2000).

Quality in the organization and management of time

It is known that the goal of ECEC contexts is to, through an adequate organization of daily routines, not only guarantee the well-being of adults and children but also create conditions for children to elaborate their experiences and acquire a sense of shared time (Nigito, 2011). Thus, Nigito (2011) and Bondioli (2011b) point out several aspects to consider in the pedagogical organization of the educational environment, specifically related to times, spaces, and groups, that can contribute to improving the quality of the ECEC contexts and with specific regard to the quality of time. They use an assessment instrument – the Device for the Analysis and Evaluation of the Pedagogical Organization of Nursery Schools (*Dispositivo di analisi e-valutazione dell'organizzazione pedagogica della scuola dell'infanzia* – DAVOPSI) – that aims to support education professionals in the process of reflection on significant aspects of the pedagogical organization of time in ECEC contexts. Some of the features considered by this instrument as indicators of quality are as follows: the inclusion of a variety of rhythms (ordered or chaotic, predictable or unpredictable, stimulating or routine); the articulation of different activities (routine moments like meals and naps, play activities, small- and large-group situations, guided by the adults or by children's initiative); and the continuity of experiences that allow the children to relate and connect the situations, integrating past experiences with present ones (as opposed to the fragmentation of situations that are not related and sudden transitions in which the meaning is not explained) (Bondioli, 2011b). It also mentions: the importance of managing transitions – from one activity to another, from one reference adult to another, and during waiting situations – that can be configured as opportunities or obstacles; the importance of personalizing collective times by giving attention and response to different needs, allowing children to appreciate and recognize the pleasure of sharing rules of collective coexistence; and balancing the social use of time, where the experience is not entirely centered on oneself but takes into account the presence and demands of other people (Bondioli, 2011b).

From this perspective, for a good organization of time, it will be necessary for professionals to consider clear planning of events, the articulation between routine moments and activities that remain

stable, and the recognition and prediction of situations that could occur. On the other hand, it will be essential to avoid rigid resolutions that do not contemplate unforeseen events, considering that rhythms, organizational schemes, alternations, experiences, and planned activities can determine each day (Nigito, 2011).

Different routines and activity settings provide children different opportunities to engage with teachers, peers, and tasks (Fuligni et al., 2012; Vitiello et al., 2012). Settings that provided children with free-choice activities have been associated with more positive engagement with peers and tasks (Vitiello et al., 2012) and more opportunities for engaging in gross motor and fantasy play. In contrast, teacher-structured activities have been associated with more positive engagement with teachers (Vitiello et al., 2012) and more opportunities to engage in language, literacy, and math activities (Fuligni et al., 2012). The time children spend in ECEC contexts is a natural temporal unit in which it is possible to establish episodes provided with educational significance that occurs during its chronological progress (Bondioli, 2004a).

Participation in the organization and management of time

The quality of time organization depends on different agents' ideas and expectations, which are not always consistent (Bondioli, 2013). Therefore, quality time management must be conceptualized and grounded in negotiation and participation. There is no quality without negotiation, so participation must be a fundamental aspect of time management (Bondioli, 2013). In a more holistic sense, child participation has been highlighted by Hart (2008), affirming that children must be actively involved in decision-making. The author proposed a model using the metaphor of a ladder with eight different levels of participation, distinguishing two main distinct degrees of participation: nonparticipation or pseudo-participant (the first three levels of the ladder) and participation (the five last levels of the ladder). The model is essential to show that there are different degrees to which children are authorized, empowered, and supported to initiate their projects and make decisions to carry them out with others. Still, adults do not always have to force the child to operate on the higher levels of the ladder. It is not right for some children to feel that they should always follow the initiative of others, just as it is not right for any child to feel that they should always be a leader (Hart, 2008). Yet, most children in urbanized countries see their lives increasingly planned and managed by adults, with few opportunities to initiate their own activities (Hart, 2008).

Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, highlighted by Lundy (2007), clearly indicates that involving children in decision-making should not be considered an option for adults but rather a legal imperative. The author proposes four interrelated conditions for the application of Article 12 to be successful, namely: (1) children must have the opportunity to express their opinions, (2) they must be facilitated to express their opinions, (3) their view must be listened to, and (4) their view must be put into practice, appropriately (Lundy, 2007).

When it comes to children's participation in the organization and management of time, it is crucial to consider their needs and interests and encourage them to participate in the definition and management of events and daily routines (Zorec & Vrankar, 2016). Malavasi and Zoccatelli (2013) draw attention to the need to consider the organization and management of time as an educational and learning experience. When it facilitates the ability to listen, negotiate, and restore meaning, it offers the optimal conditions to be open to the unexpected, the unforeseen, and the unusual and uncalculated event.

Present study

Research on the organization of time in the ECEC contexts has focused primarily on studying the time dedicated by children to each of the activities that make up the daily routine (e.g., Early et al., 2010; Strasser et al., 2009), on the quality of interactions between educators and children and their involvement in these activities (e.g., Cadima et al., 2023; Fuligni et al., 2012; Vitiello et al., 2012), or on how

different moments of the routine can be used to develop specific skills, such as oral language or mathematics (e.g., Rahn et al., 2022; Zhang & Quinn, 2018). According to Collins et al. (2023), few studies seek to understand educators' perceptions of the organization of routines despite its critical importance in planning the educational environment and promoting children's learning and involvement. Likewise, few studies report on the process of organizing and managing time in early childhood contexts, and those that do exist focus on specific moments, such as nap times (e.g., Gehret et al., 2021; Pattinson et al., 2014; Staton et al., 2015), feeding (Johansson & Berthelsen, 2014; Zorec & Vrankar, 2016), and storytelling (e.g., M. N. Prieto et al., 2018), or in specific phases of the child's development, such as the moment of transition of the baby from the family to daycare (e.g., Costa et al., 2022). Costa et al. (2022) already have affirmed that questions about the organization of time are not sufficiently explored and problematized, leading to fragmented and mechanized practices that do not consider the circumstances of the child, the family, and the institution. In our literature review, no studies were identified on the processes of organizing time in ECEC contexts, specifically in conjunction with the quality of the organization of the educational environment.

The present study aimed to overcome this gap by exploring the process of organizing time and routines in early childhood education contexts and understanding the reasons underlying this organization. Through an exploratory qualitative study, we sought to answer the following research questions: How is the routine organized in educational contexts? Who decides on time management and organization? What is the decision-making process like? To what needs does the organization of time seek to respond? And what perceptions do participants have about organizing and managing time? (i.e., What are the difficulties or constraints experienced in organizing time and what aspects are considered positive?).

Material and methods

Context and participants

The present study privileged an interpretative path (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Four focus groups were held via videoconference to answer our research questions. We aimed to listen to the experiences of professionals who work directly in early childhood education contexts. Therefore, an invitation by e-mail was sent to the educational centers and educators who collaborate in the initial training of early childhood educators from the authors' university institute. This invitation identified the research purposes and ensured the confidentiality of participants and educational centers.

ECEC in Portugal is divided into two phases with different provisions. Provision for children under 3 years old focuses on childcare and is under the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security. Preschool education (3–6 years old) is under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and is considered the first stage of basic education, but is optional, with a free-of-charge teaching component of 25 hours a week for all children from the age of 4 (European Commission, 2023). In terms of Portuguese policy and management related to pedagogy and curriculum for different age groups, there are two official documents that guide the organization of the curriculum for nursery schools (0–3 years), the Pedagogical Guidelines for Creches (*Orientações Pedagógicas para Creche*, Marques et al., 2024), and for preschool education (3–6 years), the Curriculum Guidelines for Preschool Education (*Orientações Curriculares para a Educação Pré-Escolar*, Lopes da Silva et al., 2016). These documents present a set of foundations and principles of early childhood education, integrate the relationships and specificities of education from 0 to 6 years and are intended to support the work of early childhood educators. Both guidelines adopt a holistic approach, viewing the child as both competent and keen to participate. Regarding time management, both suggest that time should be both structured and flexible, facilitating children's meaningful learning through different activities organized by educators in conjunction with children (Lopes da Silva et al., 2016; Marques et al., 2024).

A total of 20 educators participated, representing a diverse range of roles and experiences in early childhood education (see Table 1). This diversity enriches our research and ensures that the findings

Table 1. Sample description.

Educators' code name	Year of experience	Sector	Role	Children's age
E1	>30	Private	Coordinator	NA
E2	11–20	Private	Coordinator + Educator	0–3
E3	>30	Public	Coordinator	NA
E4	11–20	Private	Coordinator	NA
E5	≤10	SSI	Coordinator	NA
E6	11–20	Private	Coordinator + Educator	0–3
E7	11–20	Private	Coordinator + Educator	3–6
E8	11–20	Private	Coordinator + Educator	3–6
E9	>30	Private	Coordinator + Educator	0–3
E10	21–30	SSI	Educator	3–6
E11	11–20	Private	Educator	3–6
E12	≤10	Private	Educator	0–3
E13	11–20	SSI	Educator	0–3
E14	>30	Public	Educator	3–6
E15	>30	Public	Educator	3–6
E16	>30	Public	Educator	3–6
E17	21–30	Private	Educator	3–6
E18	≤10	Private	Educator	3–6
E19	11–20	SSI	Educator	0–3
E20	11–20	SSI	Educator	0–3

Note. SSI = social solidarity institutions.

represent the broader early childhood education community. All participants were female, between 26 and 63 years old ($M = 44.7$, $SD = 10.6$) and with between 2 and 38 years of experience as educators ($M = 21.5$, $SD = 11.3$). Most participants work in private sector educational centers ($n = 11$), five work for private social solidarity institutions, and four work in public educational centers. Four educators were only in coordination functions, seven worked with children under 3 years old, and nine were in preschool education with children age 3 to 6.

Data collection procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews in Portuguese in focus groups with between 4 and 6 participants. The interview guide was developed based on the research questions and existing literature on time management in ECEC contexts. The same interview protocol was used in all focus groups to ensure methodological consistency and control of data reliability (Cohen et al., 2005). In the present study, the following interview questions were analyzed: (1) Who makes decisions about the organization of children's time? (2) What needs does the organization of time respond to? (3) What should be maintained during the organization of time? (4) What are the main difficulties experienced during time organization? What changes should be considered and why?

The focus group moderator began the discussion, aiming to create a friendly environment, explaining the purpose of the study and giving participants time to ask questions. The moderator sought to encourage participation from all participants and kept the discussion informative and non-argumentative. The objective was not to reach a consensus but rather to collect the opinions and experiences of the participants, so it was crucial to create an environment where they felt comfortable, respected, and free to express their opinions without feeling judged (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Data analysis procedures

All focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed in the original language of the interview (Portuguese). Using these original data, two authors conducted a content analysis using the MAXQDA 2022 software. First, the four authors of the present study defined a set of thematic categories based on the topics questioned: (1) who participates in decision-making about the organization of time; (2) what needs the organization of time responds to; and (3) what are the perceptions of

Table 2. Thematic categories and descriptive category summary.

Thematic Categories	Descriptive Categories
Time and routine organization	Educational center routines Activities in specialized areas Classroom routines Care or hygiene routines Interaction times
Time organization decision-making agents	Early childhood educators Children Directors/Establishment management Specialized teachers Educators' assistants Parents and family
Time organization decision-making process	Negotiated Imposed by one of the decision agents Limited by several aspects
Needs to which time organization responds	Children's needs The pedagogical team's needs Parents and family pressures Educational center's pressures and needs Ministry of Education's pressures and demands
Participants' perceptions regarding the organization of time	The value of freedom and decision-making power The value of negotiation and articulation The value of child participation

the participants regarding the organization of time. Additionally, based on the participants' responses, two other thematic categories emerged: (4) how the routine is organized and (5) what the decision-making process is like regarding time management (see Table 2).

Then, based on the content of participants' responses to each of these topics, the second author created descriptive categories that grouped similar responses, representing participants' different experiences and opinions about time management in each of the topics (see Table 2). These categories were widely discussed among all authors, being redefined through a cyclical process so that the categories were representative of the reality of the data (Miles et al., 2014). Intracoder consistency was assessed 2 months after the first analysis, with 96.3% agreement ($\kappa = .93$), and disagreements were discussed with the other authors. To assess consistency between coders, the first author, working as a supervisor, confirmed the second author's analyses. Disagreements were then once again discussed with all authors until a final agreement or eventual re-categorization. Finally, the number of participants who mentioned each descriptive category was counted. In the Results section, we used quotes and excerpts from educators' interview answers to add detail to the data description. We included the participant code, the location of the paragraph in the transcript, and the participant's role. The authors translated these quotes, and a language specialist reviewed the translations.

Results

Time and routine organization

Participants identified a set of differentiated times, with specific activities, that were part of the routines in ECEC contexts. These routines are described in Table 3.

Time organization decision-making agents

When asked "Who makes decisions about the organization of children's time?," the participants mentioned the involvement of various educational community members. They all ($n = 20$) mentioned *early childhood educators* as one of the leading agents in this decision-making. Most participants also mentioned *children* ($n = 16$) and *school management/coordination* ($n = 15$). *Specialized teachers* ($n = 3$), *assistants* ($n = 2$), and *parents/family* ($n = 1$) were rarely mentioned as decision-making agents.

Table 3. Times and routines described by the participants.

Times/ Routines	Description	Examples
Educational center routines	Routine moments or activities that form part of educational establishment planning, defined in their educational project	Entry and exit times Schedules for using shared spaces (e.g., playgrounds, studios, kitchens . . .) Celebrations of ephemeris and other commemorative dates Adult schedules (number of educators/assistants, break, or rest hours)
Activities in specialized areas	Routine moments dedicated to activities that teachers in specialized areas usually develop	Curricular activities (e.g., English, physical-motor expression, music) Extracurricular activities (e.g., swimming, dancing . . .)
Classroom routines	Routine moments that are part of classroom planning	Activities that seek to explore and develop the content areas of OCEPE (i.e., personal and social training, knowledge of the world, expression and communication, mathematics) Recreational activities and free exploration
Care or hygiene routines	Routine moments dedicated to childcare and hygiene	Time for lunch, snacks, sleep, washing hands, going to the bathroom, among others
Interaction times	Routine moments dedicated to establishing interaction between the different educational agents	Morning meetings with children, group councils, conversations between assistants and educators, and between educators and parents

In the participants' discourse, it was evident that each decision-making agent participated in different ways in time management, as presented in [Figure 1](#). This figure represents the interrelationships between the different times and routines described by the participants and the primary decision-makers mentioned. The overlapping or proximity of the categories on the map indicates that the categories were mentioned simultaneously in the participants' speech. The results suggested four clusters that differentiate those responsible for managing the different times and routines mentioned. The educators and the children (dark blue cluster) organize the classroom's time and routine. The routines of the educational establishment and the activities carried out by specialized teachers are mainly organized by the directors/establishment management (green cluster). Care routines are sometimes managed by the directors/establishment management and others by educators and children, and interaction times usually involve these three participants (yellow cluster). The last cluster (in light blue) gathers the agents with less participation in the decision-making: specialized teachers, assistants, parents, and family members.

Early childhood educators were mentioned as the primary decision-making agents of time and activities related to the classroom routine: "In my kindergarten, educators have absolute freedom to manage their day and plan according to what they understand [is important] and the group they have. They are free to manage their daily routine" (E3, Par. 10, Coordinator). Another educator also mentioned that "around here, we are the educators who manage our daily routine, our weekly agenda (. . .) We are the ones who organize and set the times we want to work" (E7, Par. 39, Educator/Coordinator).

When planning the classroom daily routine, most participants reported trying to involve children in managing their time in the classroom. Although the level of detail in educators' descriptions was not enough to identify the eight different levels of participation suggested by Hart (2008), we noticed that the degree of children's involvement in the decision varies (see [Figure 1](#)). Eight educators only mentioned that they offer children choices or follow their suggestions during the development of activities planned by the adult, in a more *passive* involvement: "We work with projects, and we organise our projects with them [the children]. And there are things they also do and say – what they want to do and how they want to do it. Therefore, they can choose" (E17, Par. 16, Educator). Some educators also referred to adapting their plans to accommodate children's interests:

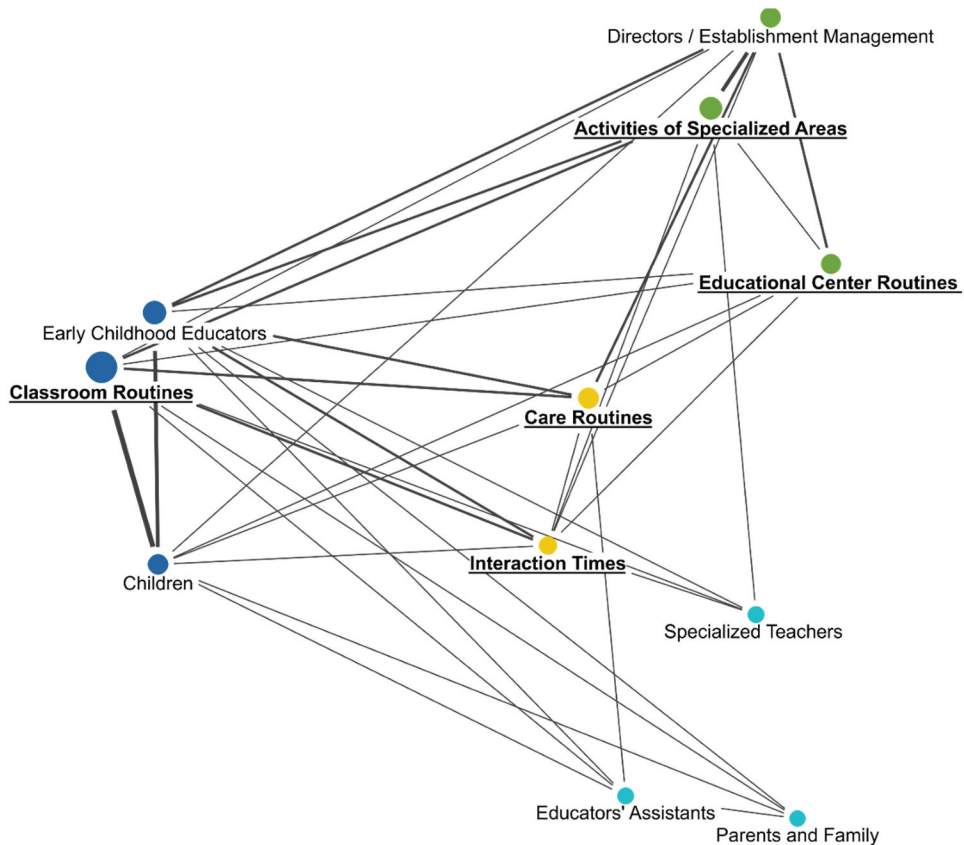


Figure 1. Relationships between times/routines of the educational center and the decision agents. *Note.* The code map was created with the focus group data using the MAXQDA 2022 software. The more frequently two categories were present simultaneously in the participants' speech, the closer they would be presented on the map.

I hadn't planned [that activity], but it came up. ... On the weekly schedule, Monday is the day we work on language development, and the story was perfect because it fit in with this time, but this isn't rigid. Although I have that weekly schedule, it doesn't mean I work on language development every Monday. We could work on language development the day we work on a project because they want to know [for instance] the difference between a horse and a pony. (E7, Par. 45, Educator/Coordinator)

Other educators (eight) sought more *active* involvement from children. "They are the ones who always choose how they want to organize their time. We are just guiding and mediating" (E18, Par. 12, Educator). Children participate in planning activities for the day and week, with an interaction time (meeting) in which possible activities to be planned with the teacher are discussed, as well as other time organizing tools that children can access:

In my classroom, all the time spent is managed by the children, me, the educator, and the people in the classroom. . . . A lot goes through them. . . everything! They are the ones who decide; they are the ones who have a task map built by them; they are the ones who suggest the tasks. I have the time maps, I have the attendance maps, I have everything done, built by them. (E15, Par. 48, Educator)

In **Figure 1**, we can also see that the routines of the educational establishment and the planning of activities in specialized areas are managed mainly by the directors, coordinators, and the establishment management:

As coordinator, which stands as a promoter of common activities at the school, I have this monthly plan. It is up to me to operationalize activities that are common to primary and preschool education because here, we

understand the school as a whole. We do not have our backs turned to each other, and the preschool, the primary education and the ATL [Free Time Activity Center] work in a very coordinated way. This coordination and management are done by me and organized in weekly meetings with all of them. [Teachers/Educators]. (E3, Par. 10, Coordinator)

Several participants mentioned that the establishment management usually scheduled the curricular and extracurricular activities developed by specialized teachers:

There is already a plan for extracurricular activities that always take place at the same time and on the same day. All classrooms follow this. They already know there is a day when the music or English teacher goes, or they have gymnastics. (E2, Par. 38, Educator/Coordinator)

Only one of the coordinators mentioned the involvement of children in managing time and space at the level of the educational establishment:

We all got together with the children and asked, “What do you think [about changing the organization of the school]?” and we changed everything. And one day it was all up and down [changing the center’s spaces and classrooms]. It was like, “Let’s go, if it doesn’t go well, we’ll go back. We’ll go back to our little classrooms again.” (E1, Par. 23, Coordinator)

The management of care, hygiene, and feeding routines (e.g., snacks, lunches) in some centers is managed by the direction/establishment management and in others by the educators themselves, which is why this category is represented in [Figure 1](#) in an intermediate position between the different agents. Some of the participants, for example, can manage some hygiene times and snacks: “at the snack level (. . .) it could be at 15h30, or 15h40, or 16 h, depending on whether they wake up, if hygiene is taking place, and if we are all ready” (E12, Par. 74, Educator). In other cases, this decision is made by management, generating some tension among ECEC educators:

Regarding changes in activity, there is one that is terrible, and I always regret having to do it and not being able to do it any other way, which is interrupting mid-morning to have a snack . . . We really have to interrupt, and usually around 10:20 am, I start: “Look, pay attention, two minutes, three minutes, we have to start tidying up,” and sometimes I feel like I’m there cutting off everything that was happening. Because if some are, in fact, hungry, others at that time were ready to continue with their construction, or with their cutting and pasting or with their game, or because they are playing a game with me and they are enjoying it and want to continue. And I say: “No, now we have to stop, we have to tidy the room, we have to wash our hands, pee. . .” I don’t know . . . that is always difficult for me to do. Because I think it’s a bit of a crime. (E16, Par. 33, Educator)

In summary, educators, children, and the management of the educational centers participate differently in time management decisions. Tensions arise when the administration issues rigid directives to early childhood educators, requiring them to adhere to an inflexible schedule that may not accommodate the unique needs and individualities of the children. For instance, if a child is engaged in play and does not feel the need to eat, they must still interrupt their activity to comply with the predetermined mealtime.

Time organization decision-making process

The study participants also mentioned that moments of interaction allow for some coordination or negotiation between educators and the various agents involved in time management and organization decisions. With children, decisions about time management were usually made during the morning meeting: “We have our daily routine, starting with the council, out meetings. We organize our daily routine there” (E11, Par. 68, Educator). The educational team also meets regularly with specialized teachers to coordinate activities and with directors and coordinators to participate in the definition of educational projects:

The [school] monthly plan is organized weekly. We have meetings with either the kindergarten team or the primary school and preschool teaching teams. These meetings are weekly, and it is in these meetings that we plan the whole month. Above that, we still have the annual plan of activities organized at the beginning of the year,

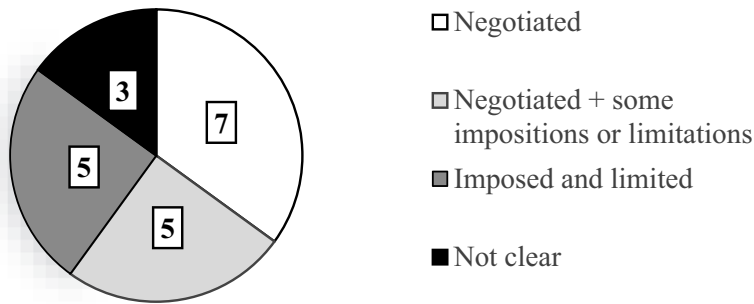


Figure 2. Time organization decision-making process. *Note.* Values indicate the number of participants mentioning the category.

which leads to monthly plans organized with the preschool and primary education teams and then weekly plans only with the educators. (E3, Par. 10, Coordinator)

Most participants reported that decision-making is *negotiated* in these moments of interaction (see Figure 2). However, in the participants' dialogue, it was clear that part of time management in the ECEC context was sometimes *limited* or even *imposed* by the management/coordination of the educational establishment: "As long we met the parameters that the institution imposes, there is no strict rule regarding [time organization]. It is obvious that there must be a routine for reception, hygiene, food, and rest" (E20, Par. 25, Educator). One coordinator acknowledged these limitations:

There are some time limitations. There is a whole organization that comes from the school's educational project, and since we have curricular activities within the timetable, it will affect the structure of the organization of the classroom according to the timetable that was assigned to each classroom. (E4, Par. 6, Coordinator)

Hence, most participants experienced impositions in time management, but they also indicated some negotiation in the decision-making process.

Needs to which time organization responds

All educators ($n = 20$) agreed that time management was or should be carried out in response to *children's needs*: "I think that schools have to plan adults' time in relation to children's time, to the well-being and needs of children" (E1, Par. 49, Coordinator). Some educators stated that time organization should be able to respond to the individual needs of each child, but admitted that this was not always possible:

In my classroom, it meets the group's needs. If I would like it to respond to more individual needs? I would! I like it a lot! But I think this is a problem for all of us, as educators, who cannot manage time for individual work [with each child] as we would like. (E11, Par. 82, Educator)

Some participants ($n = 9$) reported that time organization was also carried out in response to the needs of the *pedagogical team* (e.g., assistants, educators, and specialized teachers). "Adults also need an organization, an articulation between everyone. And that is the role of the coordinator. I don't have a class. It's up to me to streamline all the interests of these 14 classes, assistants included" (E3, Par. 48, Coordinator). Some believe that it was important to consider the needs of the pedagogical team in balance with the needs of the children "because they [educators/assistants] are also part of our day-to-day life in the classroom and are so important to us, we also have to take care of our team. And sometimes we don't care!" (E9, Par. 89, Educator/Coordinator).

Others believe that children's needs should be given priority above all else: "I think we often organize our time concerning adults' [needs], and I think that can't be the case" (E1, Par. 47, Coordinator). But in the end, participants admitted that there are more needs to be considered beyond the needs of the children: "Some [needs] cannot be overcome. We [educators] have lunch hours, for

example, right? And the children are still here. Therefore, you must respond to the needs of the school or the team” (E12, Par. 80, Educator).

Time organization was also carried out in response to requests or pressures from *parents and family* ($n = 7$): “We always want to respect each family’s time!” (E14, Par. 81, Educator). Sometimes, these pressures cause some concerns to educators:

If you ask me, “Would you like to have fewer curricular activities?” I would like to! But unfortunately, in my honest opinion, this is largely why parents look for an institution like ours, and why it would be very difficult for us to withdraw these [curricular] offers after 28 years of being in the institution. That is why 95% of parents probably turn to this institution. (E4, Par. 27, Coordinator)

Participants also mentioned that time organization was carried out in response to requests or pressure from the *establishment management team* (administrators and directors) from a financial and organizational point of view ($n = 8$). “There is a commercial part that ends up being here very connected too” (E4, Par. 57, Coordinator). Another participant mentioned that “we [as an institution] have to offer more [curricular options] to justify the values. There are two completely different realities [pedagogical and financial], which weigh a little here” (E8, Par. 51, Educator/Coordinator).

Finally, one of the participants indicated that the organization of time is carried out in response to requests or pressure from the *Ministry of Education or the legislation*:

Here, in the specific case of the children’s centers under the Ministry of Education, from 3 to 5 years old, that is, preschool, we have a teaching component that has to be fulfilled and then, obviously, it is up to internal management to establish the times in which it is fulfilled. (E5, Par. 18, Coordinator)

In summary, although all participants agreed that time organization must seek to respond to children’s needs, some tension was observed in responding to the needs of other community members.

Participants’ perceptions regarding the organization of time

When participants were asked about what they would maintain or what they would like to change about the organization of time, their discourse focused mainly on three crucial elements that, depending on the practices of the educational center where they work, were considered positive aspects to maintain or constraints they would like to change.

The first element most educators mentioned is related to their *power or freedom to decide about time organization* (see Figure 3). Educators who realized that there was high rigidity in schedules or limitations and impositions in time management in their organizations felt *constraints* that prevented them from responding to children’s needs as they would like. Most of these constraints were related to curricular and extracurricular activities, the celebration of commemorative dates and anniversaries, and arrival and departure times or care

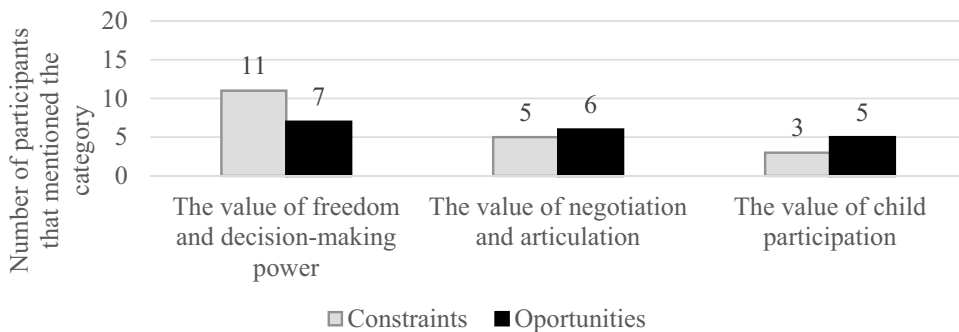


Figure 3. Participants’ perceptions regarding the organization of time.

routines, specifically lunches and snacks. Several participants expressed their disapproval of the increasing number of curricular activities in their ECEC contexts:

The time available to work effectively with children ends up being a little limited by what the school offers and what is included in the curriculum, which limits the work of the educator and the time that children have to choose the activities and what they like to do freely. (E8, Par. 7, Educator/Coordinator)

Other participants mentioned difficulty with arrival and departure times:

What I find most difficult is the group meeting in the morning, because the children arrive gradually . . . [Entry time] is flexible. If someone needs to arrive later, you just have to give notice. . . . But then we often have the group meeting compromised because the day starts with a meeting where the group establishes what will take place over the day or the week. The delay of many children often compromises this meeting. (E14, Par. 81, Educator)

The celebration of commemorative dates and anniversaries also created some tension:

I think we should rethink the time of festivities and celebrations like Father's Day and Mother's Day, we should really rethink I always feel like we are running a little bit behind this calendar, [with] this commemoration of festivities, when Mother's Day can be every day. If they want to draw for mom or dad, why can't they do it? Or if they really want to make a gift on Mother's Day they can do it, but if they don't want to, they may not do it. We should try to understand if this is actually so valuable. (E13, Par. 129, Educator)

Participants mentioned feeling little freedom or power to decide about time management and organization due to these limitations:

If we are thinking of having a picnic today, maybe we cannot go for a picnic right away because it already affects other departments and other sectors. Sometimes, there is a lack of freedom. It does not mean we don't do it; we just don't do it when we want. (E4, Par. 78, Coordinator)

Still, several educators mentioned that there is some process of negotiation or coordination carried out between the management team and the educators and that during this negotiation, some limitations or constraints were reduced:

Effectively, in terms of schedules, there has been an improvement. We were able to place [the curricular activities] later in the morning or early in the morning so that there was no interruption afterwards. However, the school is still relatively large, and there must be coordination between many classes. We don't always get the perfect schedule; we can't! But these adjustments have been made over time. (E4, Par. 27, Coordinator)

Some participants perceived that they had *greater freedom or power to make decisions*. "At the institution, we have the freedom to work as we want and at the pace we want, which is very good" (E8, Par. 79, Educator/Coordinator). They considered this a positive aspect to maintain when organizing their time:

What I would keep and change, maybe I sum it up in one word: freedom. I would keep the freedom I have and change some of the freedom I lack. In fact, I work at a school that gives me the freedom to be the educator I like to be. (E4, Par. 76, Coordinator)

The second element mentioned by the educators is associated with limitations/impositions on the schedules of extracurricular activities or specialized areas. Participants mentioned *difficulties in coordinating activities and time management* with teachers in these specialized areas, often due to the speed with which activities appear in kindergarten and the difficulty these teachers have in adapting their activities to the children's interests. Articulation happens occasionally but is not always achieved:

Things often happen so quickly in the classroom that it is difficult to share with teachers, and teachers also don't have the ability to improvise and change [activities] at the last minute. I think we, educators, have this ability to be inventing constantly. If necessary, if today children want to talk about carrots, we will talk about carrots, and we change everything, and we manage to turn things around, and often other teachers don't. They [early childhood educators] have so much agility, which has to do with our experience and ability to pay attention. (E8, Par. 37, Educator/Coordinator)

On the other side of the coin, some participants stated that curricular or *extracurricular activities can also have positive aspects* (even despite their limitations), especially if it is possible to *coordinate* these specific activities with teachers and *if schedules have been negotiated* to avoid conflicts with other activities planned by the educators:

The [specialized] teachers are “from the house,” and, therefore, this coordination that was mentioned is very easy. In fact, the [specialized] teachers interact a lot with the educators, the primary teachers, and all the nursery and kindergarten educators. There is always a work of collaboration and articulation, even more so with the musical expression teacher who often enters the room, sees the projects being developed, and tries to ensure that their time is in accordance with what is happening in the classroom. (E6, Par. 39, Educator/Coordinator)

The last element mentioned refers to *valuing children’s participation*. Three educators mentioned difficulties in implementing child-oriented time or prioritizing children’s needs or interests due to the profile of some adults in the educational community, who devalue children and want to maintain power and authority: “The problem here is not the children; sometimes the problem is the adults . . . not looking at the child . . . Devaluing the child. I have a lot of difficulty with this. And unfortunately, this devaluation is still very much experienced” (E20, Par. 77, Educator). As another participant underlined:

My disenchantment is with the adults, not with the children . . . My disenchantment is the lack of profile, lack of motivation, people who are not cut out for the job, who fell into the school by accident. Maybe it wasn’t what they liked to do, but life sent them there. (E3, Par. 114, Coordinator)

On the other hand, several participants referred to their pedagogical model and the appreciation of children’s participation in the organization of time and space as a positive, providing a set of advantages in the management of time and which have positive consequences on children’s development (usually improving the kindergarten climate):

What would I keep? I would maintain this idea that we must start with the children. The construction of our daily lives, our routines, our projects, and our way of thinking about education starts from what we observe, of the vision we have of the child, who is a child with rights, with a voice, with participation, and competent. Therefore, I maintained this, clearly! I maintained this idea of starting from the child to build the routine. (E6, Par. 92, Educator/Coordinator)

In summary, early childhood educators seem to value their freedom and decision-making power, the possibility of negotiating and articulating time organization with other professionals and child participation. When these elements are absent in their ECEC contexts, participants feel constrained in responding to children’s needs.

Discussion

The present study aimed to understand how time management is carried out in ECEC contexts, identify the agents responsible for this management, and understand the needs that underlie it and the difficulties and constraints experienced in this process. Previous studies have mainly focused only on the organization of time at the classroom level (e.g., Collins et al., 2023; Fuligni et al., 2012) or care routines (e.g., Pattinson et al., 2014; Zorec & Došler, 2016; Zorec & Vrankar, 2016). In the present study, we observed that ECEC establishments in Portugal are contexts that perform a variety of functions, with times and spaces specific to the educational center that can be organized differently and where different relationships are established between the decision-making agents (Lopes da Silva et al., 2016). Thus, while the educators and children are the leading managers of the classroom’s time and routine, the direction/coordination ends up managing, with greater or lesser participation from the educational community, the establishment’s routines, the activities carried out by specialized teachers, and even care and hygiene routines. All these activities and routines must be integrated into the organization of children’s time and cannot be viewed in isolation outside of the social and institutional context in which they occur (Costa et al., 2022; Santos, 2017).

In general, it is the educator, as the reference adult for the children, who provides and guarantees them a sense of security by offering a set of interactions and assistance to their care and interests (Hohmann et al., 1995). This idea was present in the voice of the participants of the present study, who mentioned educators as the primary agents responsible for time management. Educational assistants, on the contrary, despite also being significant adults for the group of children, were rarely mentioned by interviewees as participatory agents in decision-making about the organization of time. However, current legislation (*Decreto-Lei* No. 184/2004) indicates that they must contribute to the well-being of children and the organization of educational establishments, having the right to participate in the education process, including the organization of time.

Parents, family, and teachers in specialized areas were also rarely mentioned as participants in time management and decision-making in the ECEC context. Thus, as Costa et al. (2022) also found in their study, there is a loss in the relational dynamics between important interlocutors, such as those in charge of education, who participate inside and outside the educational establishment. The communication between the different parties enables the negotiation and reformulation of routines for the child's benefit (Costa et al., 2022) and improves the quality of the educational environment (Bondioli, 2013). The lack of communication with families can lead to disarticulation between the child's time in their family context and the time in the ECEC context, as observed by Costa et al. (2022). This disarticulation also may arise between the time of the classroom routine and the time of specialized teachers' activities due to the low participation of specialized professionals in the decision-making processes regarding the routine. The lack of synergy – understood as the closeness and sharing of responsibilities, objectives, and practices (Neves et al., 2017) – can condition children's development.

On the other hand, most of the educators interviewed showed an interest in involving children in decision-making processes regarding the organization of their time. Children's participation in routine processes promotes their autonomy and self-efficacy because it allows them to understand that they can make things happen within their time (Hohmann et al., 1995). Additionally, Epstein (2009) mentions, establishing routines together and sharing schedules creates a feeling of sharing and control, increasing children's sense of security, which is also a fundamental right of children (Lundy, 2007; United Nations, 2009).

In the present study, we identify different levels of child participation, and, as Hart (2008) indicates, all these levels offer the child a lesser or greater level of support in sharing their opinions. Some educators listen to children, but only if they express their opinions. In these situations, children who do not spontaneously express their interests may not actively participate in decisions. On the contrary, other educators are committed to sharing power and responsibility with children. This last level of involvement appears to provide more significant social and cognitive support for developing children's self-regulation capabilities (Kangas et al., 2016). In our study, educators who shared responsibility for making time decisions with children suggested that they take ownership of the routine to pursue their interests, make choices, and make decisions. In Collins et al. (2023) study, the interviewed educators also mentioned that routines, when managed by children, allowed them to develop their independence and confidence as decision-makers. As Neves et al. (2017) suggested, participation is a formative process of expanding consciousness and self-determination. For the educators in our study, the appropriation that children make of planning and time management instruments used by educators is an indicator of the existence of an educational intention, as it involves a process of joint analysis and construction with the participation of all the stakeholders, in this case, children and educators (Lopes da Silva et al., 2016). For example, in Focus Group 3, Educator 3 underlined:

I think this intentionality is visible when they [children] assume and use these instruments. When they [say], "Let's do the council, let's get the pens," and then they agree to paint with different colors what was left unfinished and what they finished. When there are conflicts, and they say, "Go write [in the calendar], and we'll talk on Friday," or "Look, you brought the book. Go put it in the diary, and we'll talk about it later." When they take ownership of this and show it to each other, and we can both observe and listen, it is this intentionality that, deep down, we also want. When they take ownership . . . they use all these instruments' functions to regulate the group

and time. The intentionality is all reflected in the dynamics between them and the classroom. (E11, Par. 106, Educator)

Effectively, well-established routines, accompanied by guidance instruments (e.g., attendance maps, calendars, diaries) that provide opportunities for choice, seem to support the child's initiative and a sense of time and continuity (Cohen et al., 2005, cited by Santos, 2017).

Comments from the educators in the present study also suggest that time management seeks to respond to children's needs but is limited by adults' agendas – pedagogical team's schedules, pressure from parents who demand a greater number of scheduled activities, or financial and organizational requests from the center management. The participants also report that time management is generally negotiated between the various agents. Still, schedules are often imposed by the institution, making it challenging to organize routines that respond to children's individual needs and interests. Tensions regarding management and routine organization emerge when the administration provides educators with inflexible guidelines that require them to adhere to a fixed timetable that does not always align with the distinctive requirements and individual characteristics of the children. M. N. Prieto et al. (2018) had already observed a temporal fragmentation in routines, which revealed aspects of adult control and power, where children are adjusted to a system that does not consider their individuality. When organizing time, as N. Prieto et al. (2015) indicate, one should not only think about institutional time but also, above all, about children's time. The role of the adult, and especially the educator, as a significant child figure, is to identify children's needs and organize the context to ensure that it responds to children's needs (N. Prieto et al., 2015).

There is evidence that routines defined at the institutional level without considering children's individual needs may harm children's engagement and emotional and behavioral development. For example, Pattinson et al. (2014) observed that in kindergartens where educators were forced to implement naps, there was a high level of stress in children, educators, and assistants, generating a negative emotional climate in the room. When routines are defined in advance and rigidly fixed, usually for all children at the same time and in the same way, it is more likely that individual differences, biorhythms, and children's needs will be unmet (Zorec & Došler, 2016; Zorec & Vrankar, 2016). Zorec and Došler (2016) suggest that most educators maintain inflexible practices regarding care and hygiene routines because educators adopt existing practices in the educational center without questioning them. In the present study, educators who feel constrained about time management decision-making also seem to accept these situations because "it has to be" (E5, Par. 18, Educator) due to space or management limitations.

Likewise, Neves et al. (2017) also observed this tension between the organization of care routines (nap, snack, lunch, hygiene) and the institutional need for these routines to be strictly carried out by all children within a specific time, reducing, as suggested by Pulido-González (2013), the possibility of some spontaneity. Neves et al. (2017) observed that some teachers considered this negotiation impossible. These routines become habits of order and behavior, being consolidated by the interaction between community members, becoming immutable, even when they no longer make sense (Pulido-González, 2013). A collective project is necessary to guide routines, educational actions, and interactions between participants in the educational community. In this way, it will be possible to prioritize the well-being not only of children but also of the adults who care for them and whose mental and physical health is essential to respond promptly to children's needs.

A quality ECEC context can only emerge from the negotiations carried out by the different agents participating in this context and through the mutual development of children and adults, as Neves et al. (2017) and Bondioli (2013) suggested. The study by Neves et al. (2017) had already observed that, although educators often have time to plan activities, time is not reserved for joint construction as a team for programming and planning. As one of the educators in our study indicated, "I would like to change the time we have to think about time. In other words, I think we have little time as educators to think about things that concern education" (E6, Par. 92, Educator/Coordinator). Failure to consider educators' schedules when managing classroom time can lead to situations like those reported by

Neves et al. (2017), in which educators from the same room mentioned not having time to meet to organize educational practice collectively and coherently. Hence, during the time management process, there must be a balance between the needs of children and the adults who are part of these children's educational process. However, as well as respecting children's freedom to choose what to do, the "when to do it" schedules set by adults will be useful for children's routine habits. The balance between the two should be considered according to the extent to which educational teams allow or enable children's participation. As Hart (2008) has referred, "More important is the recognition that we are engaged in a never-ending process . . . of improving the way adults and children work together, both in the realization of children's rights and in their shared participation in the future of their communities" (p. 29).

Adults must rethink their educational practices and constantly discuss ideas as a team to find creative solutions that make daily routines more flexible to create opportunities for the child's better cognitive, emotional, and social development (Bondioli, 2013; Zorec & Došler, 2016). Effectively, the educators in our study who manage to negotiate the organization of their time expressed greater satisfaction and indicated more positive aspects of time management in their educational center. Similar results were observed in the study by Collins et al. (2023), where educators highlighted collaboration as an essential component to create flexible routines that support children's individual needs. There must be constant communication, with a sharing of ideas, knowledge, responsibilities, and expectations about what constitutes a child's education and the educational intention of the routine, as well as a joint effort by the various agents to be able to respond to the individual needs of each child (Neves et al., 2017). Children also must participate in centers' time management to have the opportunity to live their time at their own pace (N. Prieto et al., 2015), an aspect that the participants in our study rarely mentioned. As several authors, from Bondioli (2013) to Neves et al. (2017), Hart (2008), and M. N. Prieto et al. (2018), suggest, participation, not only of adults but also of children, is a relevant concept to consider when evaluating the quality of the educational environment.

Conclusion

The results of the present study, despite being limited by the small sample size, point to the need for a closer look at issues of time organization and the importance of introducing intentionality and greater participation to overcome some perceived constraints. Our study suggests that different people organize different types of routines, some based on institutional decisions and others on more individual options. These routines must be considered in their specificity, and would benefit from broader participation to better respond to the needs of all the agents involved. Nonetheless, educators are central figures in children's education. According to the Portuguese Curriculum Guidelines for Preschool Education (Lopes da Silva et al., 2016), the responsibility for managing the curriculum lies with educators and, although there are responsibilities shared with other professionals, with families and especially with children, it is the educator's responsibility to promote the articulation of all the members involved in the educational process. Decision-making processes regarding the organization of time must respect the specific roles and skills of the agents involved, as well as their responsibilities in the common task of responding to children's needs. The process must also be open, based on interaction and the exchange and debate of ideas, knowledge, information, and opinions of all agents (Bondioli, 2013; Neves et al., 2017).

Neves et al. (2017) observed that the debate between educators was fundamental for reconstructing new perspectives and new knowledge that allowed them to look at the reality of their practice without idealizations or disqualifications and, thus, make better choices in their educational practices. The educators' reflection on time led to changes in the context of the room and the children themselves, improving the emotional climate (Neves et al., 2017). Our study suggests that time organization was different in each ECEC context. In some cases, children's involvement and some effectiveness in responding to their needs were visible. But in many cases, institutional and adult times affect routines and children's time. The need to promote educators' questioning and reflection on this topic stands

out as this could lead to adopting more participatory practices that respond to children's and adults' needs.

This study allowed a better understanding of the complexity of time management in ECEC. However, it also highlighted the importance of time management recognizing the need to deepen its study with different complementary approaches. This knowledge will sustain the development of practices that can contribute to more outstanding quality in the educational responses in early childhood education and care contexts.

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